

Nicasio Vineyards Stores Its Wine In A Cave

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Dan Wheeler of Nicasio Vineyards in Soquel has been making wine commercially for 25 years and isn't hesitant to reveal some of the tricks he's perfected in that quarter century for making fine wines.

Some of the tricks include storing his wines in a cave, never filtering or fining his wines, never mixing varieties of grapes to make a wine, putting his wines through an extra aging process and fermenting his perfectly dry champagne in its own bottle.

"I also have other tricks that I'm not divulging," he smiled. "I've been in business a long time, done my experimenting and used my head to try and make the most desirable product."

His wines are called Wine by Wheeler on the label and probably aren't familiar to most since they're not sold in stores or local restaurants. Wheeler only makes 500 to 700 gallons of wine each year and sells them directly to customers.

The only restaurant he knows of that offers his wines is Burn's Steakhouse in Tampa, Fla. where the owner has a \$2 million wine cellar.

"These are admittedly expensive and special occasion wines," he said of his products. "When my customers get low on stock, they come back and visit."

Wheeler offers wine tastings by appointment on Saturday afternoons. He can be reached at 423-1073 and suggests a two to three week advance notice.

As for some of the tricks of his trade, Wheeler explained that he had a cave dug in a sandstone hillside near his home for wine storage because the cave keeps a constant temperature of 58 degrees which is good for proper aging.

He believes in making the

purest wine possible, touched as little as possible by man. Therefore, he doesn't filter or fine any of his wines. Fining, he explained, is a process of passing a filter through a barrel of wine.

While most winemakers allow their wines to go through two aging processes — one in the barrel and the other in the bottle — Wheeler has added an intermediate bottle aging process which he believes mellows his wines further.

This allows the wine to mellow even further.

But Wheeler has added an additional mellowing process which comes in between the barrel aging and bottling. He places his wines, once they are taken from the barrels, into five-gallon glass jugs. The oxides in the wines are broken down further while the wines are in jugs, thus mellowing the wines even more.

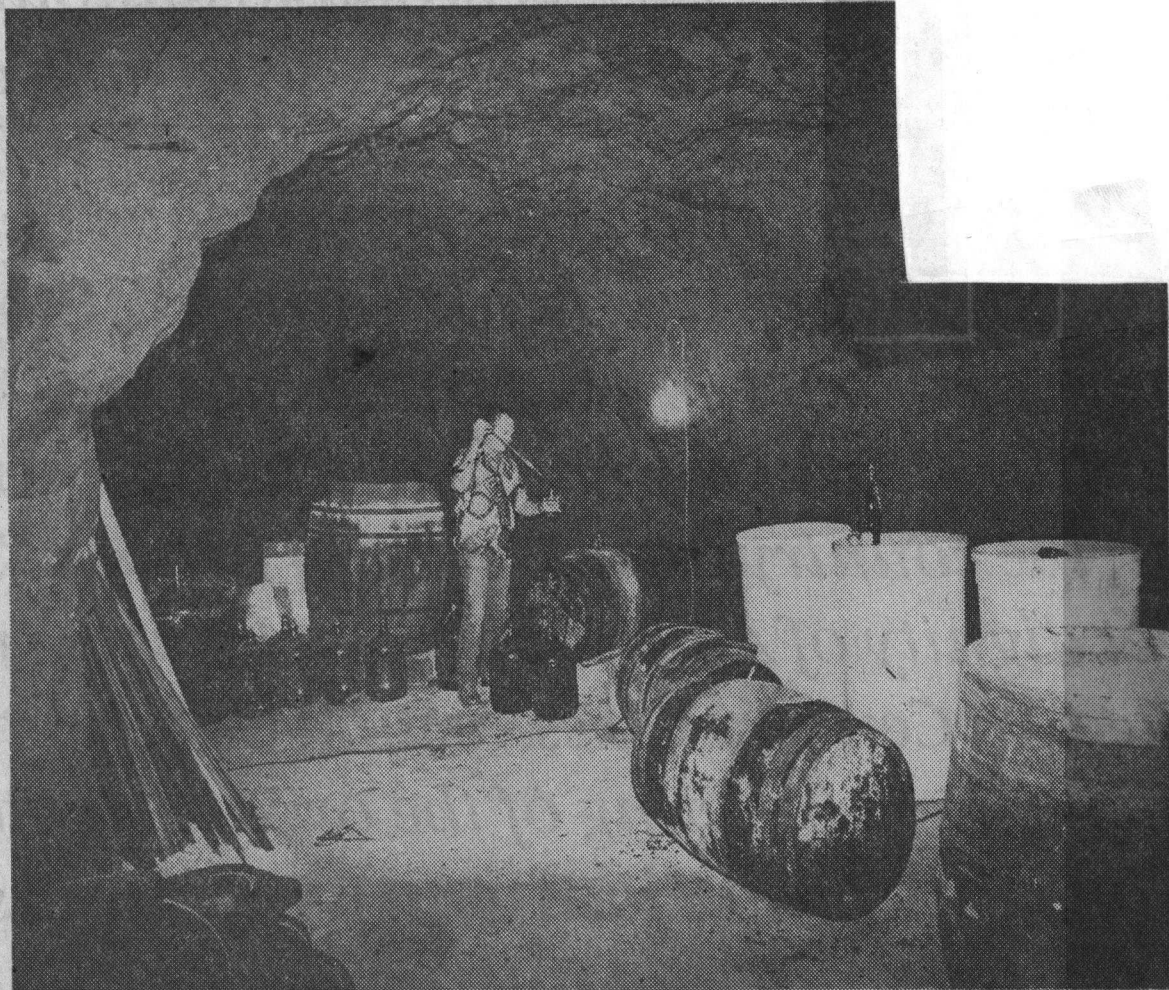
The tricks that Wheeler uses in making his champagne actually aren't

in the bottle.

"In champagne, you put the right amount of sugar and yeast in the wine to referment the wine. This causes the wine to form carbon dioxide which gives you the bubbles."

Many wineries referment their wines in large tanks and those that referment in bottles usually remove the wine from the bottles afterwards for filtering.

But Wheeler is somewhat unique in that his champagne never leaves its ori-



When wines are put in wooden barrels, the wood allows a slow exposure to oxygen, Wheeler explained. The wine absorbs the oxygen and slowly mellows.

Once the wine is put into a bottle, he continued, it is in a reducing atmosphere because of a lack of oxygen.

tricks, but a return to the traditional way of making champagne, he said.

"The traditional and proper way to make a champagne is to start with an aged wine and put it in a closed container," Wheeler stated. This allows the wine to naturally ferment right

in the bottle.

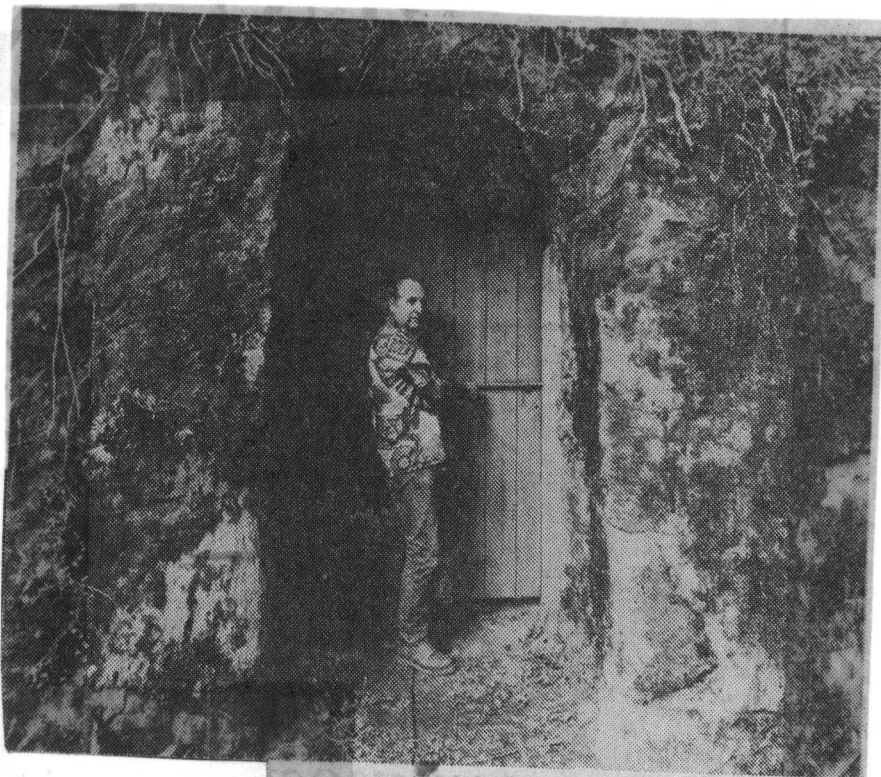
"Once you ferment in the bottle, you have sediment. You have to get rid of the sediment without losing the bubbles," he said. To perform this trick, Wheeler does what he calls a disgorging process.

After rotating the bottle

upside down until all the sediment is sitting on top of the cork, Wheeler flicks the cork off the bottle and the sediment explodes into the air. He then recorks the bottle and has a sediment-free, bottle-fermented champagne.

Another thing that's dif-

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Above, Dan Wheeler of Nicasio Vineyards enters the cave where he stores his wine.

Left, Wheeler withdraws some of his wine for tasting once inside the cave.

ferent about Wheeler's champagne is that it doesn't have a trace of sweetness. Most champagne makers, he explained, add a dosage — a mixture of sugar and brandy — to their champagne before bottling it in order to add sweetness.

Wheeler began as most winemakers do, making wine at home in 1952. He got into commercial winemaking two years later, but has continued working through

the years as a senior microwave engineer when he's not busy making wines.

Soon to retire from engineering, Wheeler said he plans to go from making wine as an avocation to making wine fulltime in his retirement.

He's already purchased 172 acres in Lake County where he plans to plant a vineyard and start another winery while still maintaining the winery in Soquel.